

Chinese and Indian Americans on the rise

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheung is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



CAME ACROSS AN article recently on the rise of Indian Americans in US academia. Indeed, this has become a trend in the United States, but also around the world. Many prominent Indian Americans today received their undergraduate education back home in India before they continued their postgraduate studies in the United States.

To name a few, there is Nitin Nohria, dean of Harvard Business School; Dipak Jain, former dean of Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management; Subra Suresh, president of Carnegie Mellon University and former director of the National Science Foundation; and Pradeep Khosla, chancellor of the University of California, San Diego. Outside the academia, Indian Americans also assume many prominent roles in the business scene; the CEOs of Google, Pepsi, and Microsoft are all Indian-born Americans.

As a member of the Committee of 100, I also take notice that Chinese Americans, like their Indian counterparts, are rising just as fast. To name a few, there was the late Chang-lin Tien, who previously served as chancellor of UC Berkeley; Henry Yang, chancellor of UC Santa Barbara (both were awarded honorary doctorates by HKUST); Chia-Wei Woo, former president of HKUST and San Francisco State University;

Wallace Loh, president of the University of Maryland; David Chang, former president of Polytechnic Institute of New York University, and Phyllis Wise, former chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In the business front, there are John Chen, CEO of Blackberry, and Harry Shum, executive vice president of Microsoft's artificial intelligence and research group.

The rise of Indian and Chinese Americans today in the West owes in no small part to the Asian tradition which emphasizes education above all. This, together with China and India's push on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education after World War II, laid a strong foundation for their children.

The Chinese and Indians were both living in poverty in the 1960s and '70s, and most knew that they had to give it all if they were to achieve a better living.

In those times, it was simply unthinkable that an immigrant would one day rise to be president of a top US university. I still remember the startled eyes of the Caltech interviewers 40 years ago at Star House in Tsim Sha Tsui, when I told them in my interview that I wanted to become a professor in a US university after graduation — they must have thought I had a big head!

Step by step, I worked toward that dream, and became one of the first Chinese Americans to rise to the administrative ranks in a US university.

When I was dean of physical science at UCLA, only two of the 15 deans were Chinese Americans. In 2006, I became the second Chinese American to serve as assistant director of the National Science Foundation (the first was Eugene Wong of UC Berkeley, who was HKUST's vice president for research and development in the '90s). I remember that some Chinese American professors would tell me that they considered me one of their role models, and I was very flattered.

A recent report points out that today, one-third of engineers working in Silicon Valley are from India, and



Visitors watch a display in a *Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation* exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. AFP

there are just as many, if not more, from China. Indian and Chinese Americans today are both thriving in the US, but at the same time they are very different peoples. From my observation, Indian Americans are a tight-knit group, and they are much more open and expressive when it comes to speaking their minds. Their English ability has helped them mesh into US society seamlessly.

In comparison, Chinese Americans are more conservative, and that sometimes puts them at a dis-

advantage. In my view, Chinese Americans have to be more assertive and bold if they want to take the next step.

The prosperity of the United States today owes much to its open society, which attracts the best talents from all over the world.

For Hong Kong to continue to grow and thrive as an international city, we must keep an open mind and a modest heart.

Going backward will do nobody any good.